

Steven T. Dennis, *Roll Call*

A handful of Members of Congress have broken from party leaders and are loudly criticizing Israel for the attack on a flotilla of aid ships headed for Gaza that left nine dead, including one American.

Several Democratic and Republican party leaders and numerous rank-and-file Members have strongly defended Israel this week following the attack, which has led to international condemnations and fury from Turkey, a key U.S. ally.

But several Members have sharply criticized Israel's blockade of Gaza and the attack on the flotilla to enforce it.

Libertarian Rep. Ron Paul was the latest to rip the attacks, speaking Thursday on "Imus in the Morning" on Fox Business Network. The Texas Republican likened the situation in Gaza to "concentration camps" and argued that the United States, as a financial supporter of Israel, is morally responsible for the Middle Eastern nation's actions.

Paul said he thinks "it's absolutely wrong" for the United States to endorse keeping humanitarian shipments out of Gaza when people "are starving and having problems that are almost like in concentration camps."

"I think it's just terrible, and I don't think we should be part of it," he added.

Paul said America should separate itself from Israel's blockade. He said he advocated the stance: "Israel, if you want to do this, you're on your own. We're not backing you up."

Likewise, liberal Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) is circulating a letter to President Barack Obama calling for Israel to pay a financial price for the raid. "Israel owes the United States more than reckless, pre-meditated violence waged against innocent people," the letter states.

Rep. Keith Ellison, who is Muslim, blamed Israel's blockade of Gaza for the confrontation and said it was counterproductive. "The blockade punishes ordinary citizens and strengthens Hamas' control over commerce," the Minnesota Democrat said Tuesday. "I am concerned for Israel's security, and an undernourished and unemployed Gazan population does not promote this goal."

Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.) also condemned the attack Tuesday. "While the U.S. supports Israel's security, it is impossible to comprehend or make excuses for Israel's decision to confront and kill civilian activists," she said. "This unnecessary and preventable incident demands a comprehensive investigation by the international community fully supported by the United States."

Others Express Support for Israel

Most Congressional reaction, by contrast, has been staunchly in Israel's defense, with House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer issuing a point-by-point defense of Israel on Wednesday.

The Maryland Democrat blamed activists on board the ships for provoking the violence and said Israel was acting within its right to self-defense. He also noted that Israel had offered to allow the aid to flow through the Israeli port of Ashdod to Gaza once it was checked for weapons, and he blamed Hamas for the blockade.

"Hamas could end the blockade at any time by recognizing Israel's right to exist, renouncing violence and releasing Gilad Shalit," he said, referring to a captured Israeli soldier.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi has been relatively neutral in her remarks, calling for an investigation into the incident, although the California Democrat declined to criticize the blockade in a conference call Wednesday with bloggers.

House Minority Whip Eric Cantor (Va.), the only Jewish Republican in Congress, has called for

Obama to veto any United Nations resolutions "reining in Israel's right to defend itself."

And he defended the blockade. "We can't forget why the blockade exists in the first place: to deny Hamas the weaponry and raw materials it needs to continue its rocket attacks in Israel, killing innocent people," Cantor said.